

Washington update
September 16, 2018

1. September 12 hearing

At a September 12 hearing, members of Congress praised the progress that has been made in Ethiopia and called on Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to solidify the gains that have been made and to extend them.

Representative Chris Smith, chair of the House Subcommittee on Africa, said the hearing was not “one not of condemnation, but of commendation for the great strides Ethiopia has made since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed assumed authority in April of this year.” The Ethiopian government must not falter now, Smith said. “The reforms begun by Prime Minister Abiy represent a once-in-a generation opportunity for Ethiopia. It is thus absolutely crucial that this opportunity not be squandered.”

Smith also discussed enactment of H.R. 128, which put the House of Representatives on record as supporting human rights and democracy in Ethiopia. He praised the role of the Ethiopian diaspora in getting the bill passed. “Success of this measure was due in largest part to the efforts of the Ethiopian diaspora community in the United States, which came together to demand that egregious human rights abuses immediately cease, and that fundamental human rights must be promoted and protected for all in Ethiopia.” Smith added “one of the greatest collateral benefits brought about by passage of H. Res. 128 is the political effectiveness of the Ethiopian American community, which provided a textbook civics lesson for all of us to admire. It is thanks to their tireless efforts of contacting your congressional representatives, of making your case in a persistent and respectful manner, that helped spur Congress to action.”

While praising Abiy’s accomplishments, Smith also said that “we still must keep in mind that expectations have been raised, and the reforms he has begun must continue. For example, the notorious Charities and Society Proclamation and the Anti-Terrorism Proclamation, both passed in 2009, remain on the books and thus retain the potential to stifle legitimate civil society organizations and political speech.”

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce (R-CA) also discussed H.R. 128, praised developments in Ethiopia, and called for continued progress. “Last April, the House passed House Resolution 128. The resolution called on the Government of Ethiopia to address governance and human right concerns head on, and we have indeed seen commendable progress since then. Since taking office in April, Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed has taken bold steps to reform Ethiopia’s government

and economy. Tens of thousands of political prisoners have been released, and many more in exile have felt safe enough to return home. Media freedom has expanded, and the government has publicly recognized the need to systematically improve human rights conditions.”

Royce cautioned that “the road ahead for Prime Minister Abiy’s government will be challenging. It must increase accountability of government officials and security forces, and ensure that all citizen voices are heard and respected.”

2. Truth and reconciliation

Smith reported that on a recent visit to Ethiopia, he heard testimony about horrific torture that the Ethiopian government had inflicted on members of the political opposition, and about the need for a Truth and Reconciliation process similar to the process that helped South Africa’s transition to democracy.

Eskinder Nega, Journalist, Human Rights and Democracy activist, and Mesfin Mekonen, initiated and delivered to Prime Minister Abiy during his recent visit to the United States a declaration calling for Ethiopia to move forward with a truth and reconciliation project animated by the spirit that propelled change in South Africa.

The goals are clear: peace, justice, respect for human rights, democracy, and prosperity. Achieving these basic goals will require a process of truth telling, particularly about human rights abuses, achieved through testimony from both victims and perpetrators, coupled to a pledge of reconciliation. The declaration, was signed by prominent Ethiopians. Its recommendations must be implemented to avoid ethnic cleansing and other human rights abuses in Ethiopia.

Mesfin Mekonen